REPORT
Beyond a Minimal Democracy
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Table 1
Participatory Democracy and Institutional Politics: Cooperation or Antagonism?

Chair
Jón Ólafsson, *University of Iceland*
jonolafs@hi.is

Rapporteur:
Matteo Spini, *Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*

Overview

The table discussed the dynamic interplay between participatory democracy and institutional politics, exploring the nuanced perspectives on cooperation and antagonism. The question of antagonism revolves around differing views on public/power relations, with proponents of democratic innovations emphasizing strengthening representative democracy, while radical thinkers see antagonism as inherent to democracy. Key topics included the crisis of democracy, institutions, antagonism, public ignorance, cooperation or cooptation, implementation challenges, and power transfer. The discussion touched on various challenges and recommendations for deliberative and participatory processes.

The section commenced with participant introductions and activities related to increased civic engagement in Italy, participatory democracy in Latin America, community organizing, social movements in the Middle East, social capital, democratic backsliding, Milan's environmental policies, and deliberative tools by the organization One Hundred, among others.

Current Situation and Challenges

In the context of participatory processes, highlighted issues encompassed citizen interaction with policy-makers, the absence of a methodological framework (including

online tools), declining participation in some online processes, agenda-setting concerns, potential threats to democratic institutions, and the delicate balance between participatory democracy and political parties.

Citizens' Assemblies and Mini-Publics

Considerations for citizens' assemblies and mini-publics included their role in capacity building, civic education, limiting elite power, protecting democracy, and providing a political learning ground. Challenges included excessive focus on design over proposals and implementation, potential unattractiveness to citizens, and dependence on election cycles. Despite being non-binding, their impact on political and media pressure was acknowledged.

Representative Democracy

Participants emphasized the importance of involving citizens in traditional representative forms of democracy while addressing the lack of democracy within political parties. The need to defend representative democracy's institutions was stressed, citing examples such as the false promise of direct democracy leading to a dictatorship in Tunisia.

The Crisis of Democracy and Liberal Institutions

Discussions on the crisis of democracy and liberal institutions examined concerns about polarization, apathy, declining turnout, and the impact of neoliberalism on representative government. The distinction between real crises and normal democratic tensions was highlighted, along with the potential influence of cultural backlash and economic elites on democracy.

Power and Power Transfer

The role of assemblies and mini-publics in enriching electoral democracy without replacing elections was emphasized. Safeguarding key institutions from external pressures and addressing patriarchal structures within Western political systems were considered essential. The need for new leaders from communities rather than the elite was underscored.

Antagonism/Polarization: Is it a Real Problem?

Concerns about social polarization's impact on communication, individual rights, and global implications were discussed. Participants highlighted the need to understand polarization caused by an increasingly defensive and violent elite.

Why Are We Upset with the Elites? And Who Are They?

Citizens' eroding trust in elites due to growing inequalities, economic influences, and control over mass media were discussed. Calls for new leaders from the community, economic equality, and limiting the power of non-democratic elites were emphasized.

Implementation

Efforts to "make democracy great again" focused on addressing socio-economic expectations, promoting democratic education for youth, and navigating challenges in open public discussion.

Recommended Steps

1. Advocated for a feminist revolution to redistribute and redefine power, connecting with young citizens;

2. Stressed the consensus that direct democratic institutions cannot replace representative ones;

3. Regarding participatory and deliberative bodies:

    a. Emphasized systematic implementation of participatory tools at the local level.
    b. Advocated for standardization of methodological approaches;
    c. Urged better evaluation of processes for continuous improvement;
    d. Called for constitutional reforms to legitimize local bodies;
    e. Highlighted the importance of democratic education and deliberative tools in schools.

4. Regarding citizens' assemblies:

    a. Called for neutral players and multiple outputs with real proposals;
    b. Advocated for improved representativeness, including multiple translations;
    c. Proposed perpetual assemblies with evolving configurations;
    d. Suggested building a system of assemblies starting at the local level-

5. Highlighted the distinction between citizens' assemblies and general participatory and deliberative processes;

6. Advocated for democracies to absorb and benefit from counterpowers like protest movements and civic organizations;

7. Imagined a quantitative tool reflecting public concerns to shape the political agenda based on public opinion rather than parliamentary majority.